DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 280 097 CS 505 539

AUTHOR Waltman, Patricia Amason
TITLE Preadolescent Support Networks: Evidence for the Peer Counselor Construct.
PUB DATE Apr 87
NOTE 23p.; Paper presented at the Joint Meeting of the Central States Speech Association and the Southern Speech Communication Association (St. Louis, MO, April 9-12, 1987).
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Communication Research; *Group Dynamics; Individual Characteristics; Intermediate Grades; *Interpersonal Communication; *Network Analysis; *Peer Counseling; Peer Groups; *Preadolescents; *Social Support Groups; Stress Management

ABSTRACT

Based on the belief that preadolescence is a highly stressful time of development and a period when people need support from peers to cope with stress, a network analysis was used to examine the social support networks of preadolescents and the behavior of central network members. Subjects, 24 sixth-grade children, completed specially constructed questionnaires concerning peer networks. In addition, to determine degrees of acceptance, rejection, and supportiveness, each child was asked to nominate three classmates with whom they most liked to play and three with whom they least liked to play. The number of nominations each received (categorized as "peer counselor" nominations) was used as an index of perceived supportiveness. Results indicated that children's social networks were clearly distinguishable by the roles played by their members and that the children perceived by peers as most supportive exhibited behaviors resembling those of natural peer counselors, and were the most highly accepted members of the peer group. Results also confirmed that children can accurately identify members of their network and the types of interactions among members, and that support is indeed a salient feature of preadolescent friendship. Finally, the results offer further support for the construct of the "peer counselor" as identified by Burleson and Waltman. (FL)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED280097

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUC
Office of Educational Research and I
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INF
CENTER (ERIC)
This document has been rep
received from the person or
originating it.
Minor changes have been mad
reproduction quality.
Points of view or opinions stated
ment do not necessarily repre
OERI position or policy

Preadolescent Support Networks: Evidence for the Peer Counselor Construct

Patricia Amason Waltman

Paper presented at the Joint Convention of the Central States Speech Association and Southern Speech Communication Association, the Robert N. Bostrom Young Scholar Award Panel.

The author wishes to gratefully acknowledge Mrs. LaWanda Waltman and the Fayetteville Public School System, Fayetteville, AR for assistance in the conduct of this study. Further appreciation is given to Cynthia Stohl for suggestions and comments on earlier drafts of this manuscript and to Brant R. Burleson and Michael S. Waltman for their support and advice throughout the course of this project.

Patricia Amason Waltman (M.A., 1983, University of Kentucky) is a doctoral candidate in the Department of Communication, Purdue University, West Lafayette, IN. Requests for copies should be made to 8321 S. 77th E. Ave. #2158, Tulsa, OK 74133.

CS505539

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Patricia Amason Waltman

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

ENT OF EDUCATION
Research and Improvement
OURCES INFORMATION
TER (ERIC)
as been reproduced as
person or organization

ve been made to improve
ity

pinions stated in this docu-
essarily represent official
olicy

Preadolescent Support Networks: Evidence for the Peer Counselor Construct

Abstract

This paper focuses on the social support networks of preadolescents and central network members. It is argued that preadolescence is a highly stressful period of development and during this period persons need support from peers to aid in coping with stress. Upon examination of preadolescent social groups it was observed that sociometric analyses of the persons providing support reveal limited insights concerning significant members of the social system. Network analysis techniques were employed in conjunction with sociometric measures to reveal central network members who are perceived to be the most supportive members of the social system. Replications of earlier findings are provided which support the notion that the most highly supportive children exhibit behaviors resembling those of natural "peer counselors".

A significant amount of research has assessed the issue of children's status levels in their peer groups (i.e. accepted and rejected). Asher and Hymel (1981) provide a discussion of several measures designed to indicate children's social positions. These authors argue that sociometric measures are among the best indicators of how children are perceived by their peers, as well as being among the most commonly used measures. Sociometric measures typically ask children to indicate who they like the most and who they like the least in their peer group. Newcomb and Bukowski (1983) describe two dimensions of children's social positions derived from sociometric measures as (a) social preference, derived from the sum of all sociometric scores, and (b) social impact, derived from the difference between the most liked and least liked scores. More extensive work on children's social status has been done by Coie and others (e.g. Coie, Dodge, & Coppetelli, 1982; Coie & Kuperschmidt, 1983, & Dodge, 1983).

In addition, research has examined the antecedents of peer group status in terms of behavioral characteristics (e.g. Hartup, Glazer, & Charlesworth, 1967), peer group entry strategies (Dodge, Schlundt, Schocken, & Delugach, 1983, & Putallaz & Gottman, 1983), as well as physical attractiveness (Vaughn & Langlois, 1983). While the results of these and many other studies provide useful insights into the characteristics of children in various status groups as a whole, very little research has examined the patterns of

interaction within smaller structures of the peer group and how these patterns reflect the communicative patterns of the peer group as a whole.

Ladd (1983) examined the structures of groups of children from the various social status categories. He reports that popular children tend to interact more with one another and less with rejected children, thus forming distinct cliques. Hansell (1985) describes a similar study in which he identifies children as being group members or isolates depending upon their interaction patterns in the peer group. These two studies merely examine structural features of the group with no attention focused on the contents of the interactions and whether the structural features differ depending upon the specific content.

Thus, what appears to be lacking from the children's peer relations literature is attention to the specific functions peer interactions serve and whether certain members of the peer group are selected to provide specific types of information. Sociometric methods alone are useful in determining the interaction patterns of persons in a large social system (specifically, who talks to whom), however, these methods are limited in the amount of information that is useful to ascertain the functionality of communication within the social system. Hence, what is ommitted is the very factor which makes the system "social". To further illuminate the role peers play during childhood and adolescence, information is essential concerning the

kinds of interactional patterns evident in the peer group. Specifically, to better understand the importance of peer interaction during significant periods of development (social, cognitive, and communicative), researchers need to more fully examine whether certain peers are sought out for specific types of information. Therefore, what is needed is a research program which focuses upon the kinds of communicative patterns through which various types of information is sent to specific members of the peer group. Research of this nature is generally conducted through the use of network analysis. Information gathered through network analysis would generate greater understanding concerning the process of communication in the social system rather than an emphasis on merely the structural features of a social group (e.g., who is accepted, isolated, or rejected). Therefore, the present study was conducted to identify the interactional patterns of preadolescents in their peer network in terms of social status as well as one particular function of communication--that of the provision of social support to peers.

Network analysis is used to examine the links through which information is sent and to determine the patterns through which information concerning various topics is sent in the peer group. By examining the specific sources of information in children's peer networks more may be understood concerning individual differences in children's acceptibility (e.g., whether some children are more accepted

because they have a greater number of sources of information or because they are the sources of information in the peer group). What may be better understood as a result of studies utilizing network methods? Network analysis may allow us to determine whether accepted children are better liked because they are able to produce qualitatively different messages or whether there are other types of inherent characteristics of these children which distinguish them from the other peer group members (which makes them more positively regarded).

One way to discern this type of information is to examine particular types of peer networks in order to determine which members have the greatest number of links within a particular context. Making distinctions among the different kinds of children's peer networks (e.g. friendship or supportive networks) would provide the opportunity to separate the links that are merely liked from those who serve particular functions (e.g., provide support) in the social network.

Social Networks and Social Support

The social network consists of all the people with whom a person regularly interacts. This large system may be partitioned into several context-specific networks. Children have family social networks, school-related social networks, in addition to friendship networks, and support networks. It is the latter type of network which will be examined in this study.

Procidano and Heller (1983) suggest that social networks are the "social connections provided by the environment" (p. 2) and that their impact upon their members is based upon the amount of social support provided to its members. According to Caplan (1974) networks provide information, support, and feedback for their members. Perceived social support may be defined as the degree to which a person believes that information, support, and feedback have been sufficiently provided in order for the person's needs to have been fulfilled.

The significance of social networks during preadolescence. During the later childhood years the peer group becomes a qualitatively different structure. Younger children view their peer relationships in more behavioral, activity-oriented ways. However, as they reach adolescence, children view friends in more affectively-oriented ways. With increasing feelings of intimacy and psychological understanding of peers, older children are able to recognize the supportive characteristics of their peers. This is the period of life in which the peer group serves a vital socialization function (Furman & Bierman, 1983).

The peer group members create their own social structure by establishing their own norms and standards of behavior. In this sense, the peer group structure provides the opportunity for stimulation of cognitive growth (Cochran & Brassard, 1979). In addition, social networks provide an

environment for norm-enforcing behavior (Hirsch, 1979). Thus, the social network may be viewed as an integral part of the socialization process of its members. Rogers and Kincaid (1981) describe the functions of the social network as helping to "change behavior, give reinforcement, and continue the changed behavior over time" (p. 85).

The social network has unique importance for persons during the preadolescent years. Douvan and Adelson (1966) argue that preadolescents have a need for intimate peer relationships for reassurance and understanding for the biological changes occurring within them. They seek confirmation from their peers that these changes are normal. During this stage of development peers serve an additional needed function, for as Berndt (1983) notes, preadolescents are drawn to one another for the purpose of establishing social identities. Erikson (1968) adds that the uncertainty of self and social identities is the major "crisis" of the adolescent years. Finally, close peer relationships are particularly important during preadolescence due to a lessening of parental influence during this period. Maccoby (1983) and Youniss (1980) argue that beginning with preadolescence persons are influenced primarly by their peers.

Because of the changing world of the preadolescent, great anxiety is common. As preadolescents seek out their peers they often choose to disregard parental wishes. This perceived "disobedience" often creates guilt for the

preadolescent, therefore, they turn to their most trusted peers for confirmation of the appropriateness of their actions. The increased stress and anxiety accompanying the transition from childhood to adolescence provides the need for these persons to seek out their peers for the provision of support. Because of the varying social status positions within a peer group structure, it would appear that some children would be sought out more often than others for the provision of support. However, exactly what distinguishes these support-givers from other accepted children in the peer group is an issue which remains unresolved and will be given further attention in forthcoming research. The focus of the present study is to determine the relationship between social status levels and the interaction patterns of the members of a preadolescent social support network.

Significant members of preadolescent social support networks. Past research has indicated that the more highly accepted children in the social system are viewed as the most supportive (Burleson & Waltman, in press). In addition, among the group of accepted persons in the system, Burleson & Waltman have identified a smaller group of persons who are perceived to be held in the highest regard in terms of supportiveness. These persons are described as natural "peer counselors". In the present study four hypotheses were tested. First, the persons determined to be "peer counselors" were expected to be from the group of children which were more accepted members of the peer group.

Second, it was expected that a positive relationship would exist between the number of links reported in the network and the number of "peer counselor" nominations for the accepted children.

One important variable in the study of social networks is the size of the members' individual networks. These may be examined in two distinct ways. First, a person's network may be examined from an ego-centered perspective, in which the network size consists of the number of persons to whom the network member reportedly talks. These ego networks may be compared across all system members or described relative to the particular network member. The size of a particular network is the number of persons to whom the respondents report they talk. A second method for analyzing social networks is from a systems-centered perspective in which an entire social system is analyzed. Each member's nominations are tallied and compared with the totals of all system members. Thus, the size of a member's network consists of the number of system members who report that particular member in his or her network. The systems-centered perspective was utilized in the present study. Size is an important variable to examine in terms of social support and peer status. The size of the networks help determine the relationship between perceived supportiveness and social status. Clearly, those perceived to be the most socially accepted should have the greatest number of links in the system. Similarly, the third hypothesis assumes that

preadolescents in the accepted group perceived to be the most supportive should have more "peer counselor" nominations in the entire network.

A second reason for examining network size pertains to the accuracy of the members' nominations. One issue which has achieved a great deal of attention in the network literature is that of the accuracy of self-report measures (see Bernard & Killworth, 1977; Bernard, Killworth, & Sailer, 1981; Burt & Bittner, 1981, & Killworth & Bernard, 1978). Many researchers, particularly Bernard and Killworth, argue that persons are very inaccurate in reporting any information regarding to whom they talk. To determine the stability of children's perceptions of the supportiveness of their peers, it was hypothesized that there will be a significant relationship between the number of "peer counselor" nominations received and the size of each member's support networks. The stability of children's perceptions of peer supportiveness was assessed to determine whether the children nominated the same group of peers as the most supportive with both the sociometric measure and the network questionnaire considering the one-year time lapse.

Summary of Hypotheses

H1: There will be a significant positive relationship between the number of "peer counselor" nominations and membership in the accepted group.

H2: For members of the accepted group, there will be a significant positive relationship between the number of links reported in the network system and the number of "peer counselor" nominations received.

H3: There will be a significant positive relationship between the number of "peer counselor" nominations and the number of incoming links for the entire system.

H4: There will be a significant positive relationship between the number of "peer counselor" nominations received and the overall size of the persons' networks.

Method

Subjects:

A total of 24 children participated in the study. They were all members of a sixth grade class in a public grammar school in a relatively small southern community. Permission for the children to participate in the study was secured from both the parents and school authorities. The mean age of the subjects was 11 years, nine months. The children were primarily from middle class backgrounds and all were caucasion.

General Procedures:

All questionnaires were administered in written form by the children's classroom teacher. The children were informed that their responses were to be held in confidence, and to insure anonymity their responses were assigned code numbers. The questionnaires were completed during the regular school day in a normal classroom environment.

Peer-Based Assessments of Acceptance, Rejection, and Perceived Supportiveness

In order to assess group members' degree of acceptence, rejection, and supportiveness, sociometric nomination techniques were employed. To assess each child's relative level of peer acceptance or peer rejection, the children were asked to nominate three of their classmates with whom they most liked to play and the three with whom they least liked to play. The sums of each of these measures were totaled to provide indices of peer acceptance or rejection for each child. These techniques have been determined to be both valid and reliable when used in studies with children (see Asher & Hymel, 1981; Burleson, 1986, & Ladd & Asher, 1985).

Similar procedures were used to ascertain the perceived supportiveness of each of the children. The participants were administered four situations in which they were asked to imagine themselves in potentially distressful situations (one in which a friend was angry with the distressed person, one in which the distressed person was to be punished for breaking a parental rule, and one for breaking a teacher's rule, and finally, a situation in which they felt depressed for no special reason). They were then asked to list the names of two of their classmates they would most likely talk to about each of the situations in order to feel better. The number of nominations each child received (categorized as "peer counselor" nominations) was used as the index for

perceived supportiveness. Those whose nominations totaled one standard deviation above the mean were designated as "peer counselors".

The Measurement of Preadolescents' Support Networks

A questionnaire was constructed specifically for this study and was administered one year following administration of the sociometric questionnaires. The participants were given a roster listing all of the children's names from their class. This measure, as described by Albrecht and Adelman (1984), was used rather than a free-response questionnaire in order to guarantee responses concerning all members of the social system. The names of the children in the class not participating in the earlier data collection were omitted from the roster. The children were asked to circle the names of their classmates to whom they talk when they are upset or depressed and need support.

Results

The number of "peer counselor" nominations was totaled and comparisons were made between these totals for the children categorized as accepted and those rejected by their peers based upon sociometric nominations. A significant positive correlation was found between the number of "peer counselor" nominations and a child being accepted by peers ($r = .66$, $p. < .007$). While in the positive direction, a nonsignificant correletion was found for the number of "peer counselor" nominations and a child being rejected by peers.

This finding which supports Hypotheses 1 replicates findings reported by Burleson and Waltman (in press) that the children perceived to be most supportive by peers also are the most highly accepted members of the entire peer group.

The second hypothesis, that there will be a significant relationship between the number of accepted children's "peer counselor" nominations and their numbers of incoming links in the support network was supported. There was a significant correlation between these children's "peer counselor" nominations and the number of incoming links ($r = .60$, $p. < .007$). There was a nonsignificant relationship between these two scores for the rejected children.

The third hypothesis, that the children in the accepted group receiving the greatest number of "peer counselor" nominations would have the most incoming links was supported. A significant positive correlation was found for the children with the greatest number of peer counselor nominations ($r = .64$, $p. < .004$), whereas a nonsignificant relationship was found for the children in the rejected group.

The fourth hypothesis, that in terms of the entire system (the aggregation of both the accepted and rejected groups of children), the children receiving the greatest number of "peer counselor" nominations (those perceived to be the most supportive in the entire system) will have the largest networks was supported ($r = .67$, $p. < .001$). This finding is highly significant for the present study for

three reasons. First, it confirms that certain children are more highly sought out for the provision of support by peers and that their acceptance has some relationship to their supportive nature. Second, this finding provides positive support for the notion that this self-report data has some accuracy and reliability in that the reports were made one year apart. In addition, the incidence of this finding reveals that supportiveness from peers is an extremely salient feature of peer relationships during the preadolescent years.

Discussion

The results of this study indicate that children's social networks are clearly distinguishable by the roles played by the members. The social systems of preadolescents may be dilienated in regard to the particular functions these members exhibit during their interactions with peers. Because preadolescence is an especially tempestuous transitional period, these persons appear to rely heavily on significant peers to feel better about their problems. Hence, within the larger social structure lie small, distinct support networks. Membership in these networks is comprised largely of persons who are viewed as especially supportive by the majority of the persons in the social system.

Moreover, the social system consists of small groups in which children may be viewed in terms of their status within

the system. Children may be considered as accepted or rejected based upon sociometric nominations from peers. Among the accepted members of the system are the ones who are perceived by the entire system to be the most supportive; these children have been categorized to be natural "peer counselors" (Burleson & Waltman, in press).

The results of this study imply several conclusions concerning network analysis. Accepted children, and in particular the "peer counselors", have the greatest number of incoming links in the overall system. "Peer counselors" have many more incoming links in the support network than do any other members. These persons' links indicate that these key persons are indeed sought out the most often for discussion of problems when support is needed. It has been argued that supportive communication is crucial for persons to cope with their problems and to manage the stressors which are associated with problems (e.g. see Cobb, 1976 & Silver & Wortman, 1980).

Of great significance are the findings concerning the accuracy of the subjects' responses. Three distinct and significant results are evident. First, support may be provided regarding the issue of informant accuracy and whether people truly are aware of their network members and the types of interactions occurring with their members. The relationship between the responses with a one-year time span is important for demonstrating that persons do indeed have cognizance of with whom they discuss certain issues.

Secondly, what has been revealed is that support is a salient feature of friendship during the preadolescent period. Finally, further support was provided for the "peer counselor" construct first identified by Burleson and Waltman (in press). Not only does it appear that "peer counselors" are identifiable in the social system as a whole, but they are particularly evident in the smaller support networks. The use of network analysis in tandem with sociometric procedures provides a broader knowledge base concerning the characteristics of the social status groups. Because of its focus on types in addition to patterns of interaction, more may be understood concerning the reasons these social status groups exist.

Future research concerning network characteristics of social support systems should examine the particular topics discussed with the individual "peer counselors". This would provide more information concerning specific functions of support network membership. In addition, more attention should be paid to the rejected children (the isolates). Clearer information is needed in order to more fully understand what makes a person an isolate (it is not known whether these persons have a communicative skill deficiency in general or whether it is centered upon support-giving alone).

Network analysis has a distinct place in the research focusing on children's social status groups. By integrating the techniques of network analysis with theory of children's

social relationships, more may be understood concerning the means by which the peer group helps in the creation of the overall identity and the development of secure and meaningful relationships.

REFERENCES

Albrecht, T. L. & Adelman, M. B. (1984). Social support and life stress: New directions for communication research. Human Communication Research, 11, 3-32.

Asher, S. R. & Hymel, S. (1981). Children's social competence in peer relations: Sociometric and behavioral assessment. In J. D. Wine & M. D. Smye (Eds.), Social competence, (pp. 125-127). New York: Guilford Press.

Bernard, H. R. & Killworth, P. D. (1977). Informant accuracy in social network data II. Human Communication Research, 4, 3-18.

Bernard, H. R.; Killworth, P. D., & Sailer, L. (1981). A note on inferences regarding network subgroups: Response to Burt and Bittner. Social Networks, 3, 71-88.

Berndt, J. J. (1983). Correlates and causes of sociometric status in childhood: A commentary on six current studies of popular, rejected, and neglected children. Merrill Palmer Quarterly, 29, 439-448.

Burleson, B.R. (1986). Communication skills and childhood peer relationships: An overview. In M. L. McLaughlin (Ed.), Communication Yearbook (Vol. 9). Beverly Hills, CA: Sage.

Burleson, B. R. & Waltman, P. A. (in press). Social-cognitive and communicative characteristics of rejected, and supportive preadolescents. To appear in M. L. Mc Laughlin (Ed.), Communication Yearbook, 10, Beverly Hills, CA: Sage.

Burt, R. S. & Bittner, W. M. (1981). A note on inferences regarding network subgroups. Social Networks, 3, 71-88.

Caplan, G. (1974). Support systems and community mental health: Lectures on concept development. New York: Behavioral Publications.

Cobb, S. (1976). Social support as a moderator of life stress. Psychosomatic Medicine, 38, 300-314.

Cochran, M. M. & Brassard, J. A. (1979). Child development and personal social networks. Child Development, 50, 601-616.

Coie, J. D.; Dodge, K. A. , & Coppetelli, H. (1982). Dimension and types of social status: A cross-age perspective. Developmental Psychology, 18, 557-570.

Coie, J.D. & Kupersmidt, J. B. (1983). A behavioral analysis of emerging social status in boys' groups. Child Development, 54, 1400-1416.

Dodge, K. A. (1983). Behavioral antecedents of peer social status. Child Development, 54, 1386-1399.

Dodge, K. H.; Schlundt, D.C.; Schocken, I., & Delugach, J. D. (1983). Social competence and children's sociometric status: The role of peer group entry strategies. Merrill Palmer Quarterly, 29, 309-336.

Douvan, E. & Adelson, J. (1966). Modal patterns in American adolescence. In L. Hoffman & M. Hoffman (Eds.), Review of child development research. (Vol 2). New York: Russell Sage Foundation.

Furman, W. & Bierman, K. L. (1983). Developmental changes in young children's conceptions of friendship. Child Development, 54, 549-556.

Hansell, S. (1985). Adolescent friendship networks and distress in school. Social Forces, 63, 698-715.

Hartup, W.W.; Glazer, J. A., & Charlesworth, R. (1976). Peer reinforcement and sociometric status. Child Development, 38, 1017-1024.

Hirsch, B. J. (1980). Natural support systems and coping with major life changes. American Journal of Community Mental Health, 6, 159-172.

Erikson, E. (1968). Identity: Youth and crisis. New York: Norton.

Hirsch, B. H. (1980). Natural support systems and coping with major life changes. American Journal of Community Psychology, 8, 159-172.

Killworth, P. D. & Bernard, H. R. (1976). Informant accuracy in social network data. Human Organization, 35, 269-286.

Ladd, G. W. (1983). Social networks of popular, average, and rejected children in school settings. Merrill Palmer Quarterly, 29, 283-307.

Ladd, G. W. & Asher, S. R. (1985). Social skill training and children's peer relations. In L. L'Abate & M. Milan (Eds.), Handbook of social skills training (pp. 219-244).

Maccoby, E. E. (1983). Social-emotional development and response to stressors. In N. Garmezy & M. Rutter, (Eds.), Stress, coping, and development in children. New York: McGraw-Hill.

Newcomb, A. F. & Bukowski, W. M. (1983). Social impact and social preference as determinents of children's peer group status. Developmental Psychology, 19, 856-867.

Procidano, M. E. & Heller, K. (1983). Measures of perceived support from friends and from family: Three validation studies. American Journal of Community Mental Psychology, 11, 1-24.

Putallaz, M. & Gottman, M. M. (1981). An interactional model of children's entry into peer groups. Child Development, 52, 986-994.

Rogers, E. M. & Kincaid, D. L. (1981). Communication networks: Toward a new paradigm for research (p. 85). New York: Free Press.

Silver, R. & Wortman, C. (1980). Coping with undesirable life events. In J. Garber & M. Seligman (Eds.), Human helplessness: Theory and applications. New York: Academic Press.

Vaughn, B. E. & Langlois, J. H. (1983). Physical attractiveness as a correlate of peer status and social competence in preschool children. Developmental Psychology, 19, 561-567.

Youniss, J. (1980). Parents and peers in social development: A Sullivan-Piagetian perspective. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.